DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 885 FL 003 224

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TITLE Teaching Composition: A Report on a Bidialectal Approach.
PUB DATE 28 Feb 72
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Sixth Annual TESOL Convention, Washington, D.C., February 28, 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Classroom Techniques; College Language Programs; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Composition Skills (Literary); Creoles; Cultural Pluralism; Curriculum Design; Educational Objectives; *Language Styles; Negro Dialects; *Nonstandard Dialects; Rhetoric; *Standard Spoken Usage; *Teaching Methods; Team Teaching; Textbooks; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the problem of teaching formal composition skills to those whose repertories lack formal standard speaking style. The approach advocated here is bidialectal and is based on the idea that control of a variety of language styles is a useful tool and that productive competence of formal composition style is a mandatory skill for those who wish to obtain a university degree in this country. The educational objectives of this approach are to teach the student to identify the features which distinguish standard from nonstandard usage, to recognize the appropriateness of dialects to situations, to identify the features which distinguish the registers with special emphasis on those of the formal written register, to recognize the functional interrelationship between registers and dialects within the speech community, to write compositions in the standard dialect on many topics using standard rhetorical techniques, and to organize and carry out a research topic in acceptable academic form. Details on classroom techniques, textbooks, and procedures are provided, and a bibliography is included. (Author/VM)

ED 062 885

TEACHING COMPOSITION:

A REPORT ON A BIDIALECTAL APPROACH

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Paper Presented at

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
1972 Convention, February 27-March 1
Washington, D.C.

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FL 003 224

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Abstract:

This paper briefly outlines the rationale for choosing a bidialectal approach for teaching composition, including a description of the approach, our assumptions, and the class objectives. The paper then describes the techniques used to meet the objectives and concludes with an informal evaluation of the experimental project.

Many linguists and sociolinguists have discussed the implications of productive competence of certain varieties of language styles for success in public schools. (Labov 1969, 1971; Fasold and Shuy, 1969; Hall 1969; Jacobson, 1971) Some of their conclusions seem to be that young people learn the vernacular of their peer group with little regard to parental or school norms; that expected school norms are those of the controlling middle-class; and that the speech of lower socio-economic class children is most divergent from those school norms.

The formal written style acceptable for use in American academia is most nearly like formal spoken style, but still somewhat different from it. Middle-class children, even if they have control of the formal spoken register, must still be taught the characteristics of logical rhetorical forms and the features of the written style, such as complex embedding and sentence varieties which do not occur frequently in the formal spoken register.

The teaching problem is compounded when the students do not have in their productive repertoires, the formal spoken register, as in the case of the students we will describe below. The question that concerns us is how to best teach formal composition skills to

those who need them, and whose repertoires lack the formal standard speaking style.

In the Preface to Teaching Standard English in the Inner City, Roger W. Shuy outlines three approaches to this pedagogical problem. (pp. ix-xvi) The traditional approach has been the "eradiction" model. That is, the speech patterns of the students are non-functional to the success of the child in school and therefore should be eliminated and substituted for by the patterns of the school norm, i.e., middle-class Standard English (whatever that is). The difficulty with this approach is, that while the children's speech patterns may not conform to school norms, they are indeed highly functional in their own speech community. Thus, the message that the child receives from this approach is that his speech is "bad", and since speech directly reflects cultural patterns, his culture must also be "bad". Our feelings concerning the efficacy of the eradication approach can best be summarized by Galvin and Troike's statement that "brain surgery, the only effective way of getting rid of a pattern, is simply not an acceptable classroom procedure in our society." (1969, p. 152)

At the other end of the spectrum of pedagogical approaches is the adherence to the notion of cultural and linguistic pluralism.[1] In brief, this approach holds that it is about time our society became aware of the fact that there exist many cultures and that people must have a more tolerant position toward them. In other words, teach everyone an appreciation of differences and do not try to change anything. While we, the authors, whole-heartedly agree in principle

with this notion, the "leave-it-alone" attitude can only handicap the student who wishes to successfully negotiate the academic world. This conviction seems to concur with that of many Black parents as well.

A middle position grows out of foreign language teaching pedagogy --the bidialectal approach. In teaching a foreign or second language, no value judgements are made about the native language; the student merely adds a language system and knowledge of a different culture to his skills. Use is made of his existing linguistic competence by such techniques as contrastive analysis, use of the student's ability to analogize about language patterns, etc. The assumption is that this approach, with modifications can be successful in teaching standard dialect forms to speakers of non-standard dialects. Stewart (1970) describes this as a quasi-foreign language situation, in which some of the foreign language teaching techniques can be used, but because of the similarities between the dialects and, often, negative attitudes toward the non-standard forms, certain modifications must be made.[2]

A bidialectal approach recognizes the fact that control of a variety of language styles is a useful tool. It recognizes too that the student of a second dialect should understand the manner in which his own language variety reflects his culture as well as that relationship for the second dialect.

In the ideal world, the approach of the cultural pluralist appeals to us most, but the fact remains that there are few professors

who will accept, much less comprehend, research papers written in any style other than "Standard Academic." We conclude then, that productive competence of formal composition style is a mandatory skill for those who wish to obtain a university degree in this country.

The students in the experimental class under discussion are in the University-Community Education Program (U-CEP) at the University of Pittsburgh. U-CEP is a special recruitment and admissions program initiated at the University in September, 1968 and designed to increase the enrollment of Black and other minority group students at the institution. Students enrolled in the program are by and large Black youths from Pittsburgh's inner-city communities who fall within national poverty guideline categories. From its inception, U-CEP offered a series of courses to its students including Mathematics and English Composition. The project under discussion was recently instituted in an attempt to assess the degree to which a non-traditional approach to composition could improve the composition skills of U-CEP students.

The choice of the bidialectal approach reflects the following assumptions on our part:

1) The differences between Black dialect and Standard English are the result of an historical process described as "decreolization,"[3] i.e., that Black dialect is a decreolized variety of a former Creole which is now similar to Standard English, but not a corruption from it.

2) There is a distinct Afro-American culture, and composition skills should be taught so as to recognize the legitimacy of various cultural and linguistic forms of expression.
3) Logic, as we know it to be expressed in rhetorical forms is culturally conditioned, not a function of innate intelligence, and must be learned.

Although most professors tend to equate logic with intelligence, Robert Kaplan (1971) documents divergent styles in logic as they are manifested by various cultures.

Corollaries to this assumption are a)that speakers of non-standard dialects who want a university education need the writing skills appropriate to that setting, and b)that language and culture are inextricably mixed, so that to eradicate one is to negate the other.

4) Learning a second dialect is more difficult than learning a second language,[4] because of the similarities between dialects and because of the emotionalism surrounding the study of dialects, and particularly of Black dialect.[5]

Given these assumptions concerning the students and Black dialect, we feel that the bidialectal approach offers the greatest opportunity for the students to add to their language skills without demeaning their present repertoire. It is this positive factor which distinguishes the bidialectal approach from other more traditional ones,, and provides an essential motivating factor.

We proposed that by the end of the course, the students of U-CEP 21-22 would be able to:

1) identify the features which distinguish "standard" from "non-standard" usage.

This objective most clearly reflects the quasi-foreign language situation. In a bilingual situation, the student sees immediately that the patterns are different. Speakers of a non-standard dialect, on the other hand, are often unaware of linguistic differences because of the great similarities between dialects. The points of divergence must be brought to the conscious awareness of the student of a second dialect.

2) recognize the appropriateness of dialects to situations.

If we are to add to the students' repertoires and not eradicate Black dialect, the student must be made consciously aware of the function of each.

3) identify the features which distinguish the registers with special emphasis on those of the formal written register.

Although the students' linguistic abilities include a variety of language styles, they usually are not consciously aware of this nor of the differences between the styles. In order to add to performance skills (which do not, in the case of our students, include the formal written style) the students must be made aware of the distinctions between registers and especially those which differentiate the formal spoken from the formal written style.

4) recognize the functional interrelationship between registers and dialects within the speech community.

It is essential for the student to understand the function and legitimacy of Black dialect if he is to become truly bidialectal.

5) write compositions in the Standard dialect on many topics using standard rhetorical techniques.

6) organize and carry out a research topic of his choice in acceptable academic form.

The last two objectives are no different from those of traditional courses in Freshman Composition. They merely reflect our assumption of the necessity of such skills to university work.

The implementation of our objectives required a variety of procedures and techniques which are described below.

Instructors

Because of our assumption that we are dealing with a quasi-foreign language situation, the best qualified instructor is one who is trained in linguistics and foreign language teaching and who is versed in Black dialect and culture. For lack of an individual equally qualified in all areas, we found that a team-teaching combination worked effectively. (This is not to say that a team-teaching situation is optimum, but that it worked well for us.)

Contrastive Analysis

To implement our first objective of bringing to the students' conscious awareness the distinctions between Black dialect and

Standard English, we introduced a set of materials containing a contrastive analysis of Black dialect and Standard Written English.

Our students' immediate reactions were totally negative. The examples attributed to Black dialect were condemned as "ignorant", "rural", "Nobody talks like that." Although the materials had not been presented as examples of speech, and although our students consistently produced similar examples in their own compositions, they were not ready for this type of contrastive analysis, and we soon abandoned it.

Our commitment to the use of contrastive analysis remains, and Reed and Baxter's (1970) success with such materials would seem to confirm our opinion. Further experimentation is needed to ascertain precisely when and how it should be introduced in a program of this nature. In the meantime, the teacher should have at his disposal a contrastive list for diagnostic purposes, but perhaps at the beginning, the students shouldn't be exposed to the analysis, especially in written form.

Discussion of Dialects and Registers

In order to bring to the students' conscious awareness the distinctions between dialects and registers, the students needed certain historical and linguistic information concerning language and language change.

These sessions were often introduced by a pre-discussion quiz to provoke thought and discussion of the material to be taken up. The quizzes usually contained some highly emotion-charged statements

which were to be marked True/False, such as "True or False: Black dialect is a corrupt form of Standard English." We feel that a problem-solving approach to learning is much more interesting and valuable for the students than a lecture-memorization procedure, and this type of quiz was very effective in involving the students with the material.

First, regional varieties of American English were discussed in terms of phonology, lexicon, and structure and of the manner of language change. Major immigrations of minority groups to the United States were discussed and examples of lexical items from their foreign languages were presented. This was done in a problem-solving fashion, using the students' knowledge of American history and their familiarity with regional speech expressions to provide evidence for the theoretical discussion. Many knew, for instance, of the Pittsburgh rhyme of "cot" and "caught", the local choice of "gumband" for "rubber band" and the structure "needs washed" for "needs to be washed."

During this discussion, mention of Africans and their languages (except for a few lexical items) was purposely omitted in the hope that the students would detect the omission and question how all the other groups could have had such an impact on American English, but not the Africans. That they didn't question it may result from their lack of knowledge about African languages or be testimony to the success of the eradication approach.

Next, using the same informal lecture-discussion technique, the students were presented with various linguistic theories concerning Black dialect which have held credence in the past few decades, i.e., the physiological-pathology explanation, the deficit deprivation view, the linguistic-geographers' description and isolation explanation, and the Creolist position. The latter included a discussion of Gullah and its place in the development of Black dialect. Given the last theory in conjunction with the previous discussion of dialect change, it was an easy step to the suggestion that perhaps the African languages have had a much greater impact on American English than the students had previously imagined[6]. That this information was new and somewhat startling was expressed in the comment of one student to another during the presentation: "Why hasn't anyone told us this before?"

We felt that this was an excellent technique for establishing a base from which the students could operate in the study of language styles. The only positive way to approach the study of language differences is with the knowledge of one's own linguistic tradition. The motivational impact of this cannot be too strongly emphasized.

The third element in establishing conscious awareness was a discussion of language styles or registers. Briefly, a dialect is defined by the user, e.g., New Englander/Mid-westerner/Southerner, and register by the use, e.g., newspaper reporting/advertising copy.[7] The personal registers, adapted from Joos' (1961) The Five Clocks, are paraphrased as follows: Frozen: "the language of books." Formal: "the language of professors in a classroom

situation," Consultative: "the language used when asking a stranger for information," Informal: "the language used among friends," and Intimate: "the language of very close friends or between married persons.[8] Like dialects, registers vary in phonology, lexicon and structure. The formal spoken register used by speakers of Standard English, as stated above, is most nearly like the writing style required of university students.

The students were asked to work out a framework of registers in terms of users and function for their own speech community. This was accomplished in class in informal discussion. The students knew in advance that there is currently no definitive classification for Black dialect and that we, as instructors, could help them ask the questions, but could not tell them whether their answers were "right" or "wrong." The students seemed genuinely excited at the idea of discovering new "facts" about their speech community. They decided to preserve the terms Formal, Consultative and Informal (Frozen was discarded--"nobody talks like that.") but redefine them. Informal meant for them "togetherness," Consultative was the register used to manipulate Whites for one reason or another, and Formal needed little redefinition. By this time, the students had a clear grasp intellectually of the different registers, and began to tease one student whose formal reading style spilled over once in a while to his conversation. "Now you're talking Formal." "You don't have to talk formal with us." However, they were unable to produce specific language examples which would show the contrast in their own speech.

We then gave the students contrived examples of a dialogue in two registers. A young man meets 1) an old high school buddy, and 2)a friend of his father's. The information exchanged is essentially the same in both versions, i.e., greeting and "catching up on the news." The students read the dialogues silently with some amusement, especially at the first situation. (They read the dialogues silently so that our oral interpretation would not influence their judgement as to the register.) Then, they identified the registers, enumerated the variables, and isolated distinct differences, such as:

Informal	Formal
Long time, no see.	I haven't seen you in a long time.
Wha'cha been doin'?	What are you doing these days?
Glad I bumped into you.	It was nice talking to you.[9]

At the end of this part of the exercise, there was even greater amusement. "What's the matter?" met with the response: "None of <u>our</u> friends talk like that." It was clear that the dialogues, written by Mary Bruder, did not in fact reflect the speech of the students. The students were then asked to rewrite the dialogues so that they sounded natural to them.

The resulting dialogues showed the important place of "slang" in their informal register.[10] (It may have been the absence of this feature in the informal model which made it sound strange to the students.) There was an almost total lack of "slang" in the students' formal versions.

Inf. Model: Hey, Jack. How are you? Long time, no see.
Rewrite: What's happening, Jack, ain't dug you in awhile.

Inf. Model: Are you still living at home?
Rewrite: Are you still cribbing with your raise?

For. Model: Hello, Mr. Hastings. How are you? I haven't seen you for a long time.
Rewrite: Hi, Mr. Hastings. How you doing? I haven't seen you in awhile.

For the most part, the rewritten dialogues consisted of substitution of lexical items; there was little variation structurally from the models; and we found no consistent usage of the features usually found on the lists of features of Black or non-standard dialects. (McDavid, 1967; Fasold, 1969)

There was one startling exception to this. The students were asked to read their dialogues to the rest of the class. One student whose version of the informal dialogue was quite similar to the model had written:

What going on?	but <u>read</u>	What's going on?
It been a long time...		It's been a long time...
I about through...		I'm about through...
I be glad...		I'll be glad...

His formal versions of the same dialogue contained no such graphic deletions. To date we have no explanation for this, but mention it as deserving of further attention.

In an effort to determine whether or not the students had been influenced to use the same structures as the models instead of structures usually associated with Black dialect, we asked the students to create orginial dialogues in two registers on a topic of their choice. It proved very difficult for them to choose topics which could be discussed appropriately in more than one one register, thus the relationship between topic and register became very clear.

While they did not come up with many very original dialogues, we feel we did reinforce the function of registers.

They also became aware that the registers of the two dialects diverge most on the informal level, and that the more formal the spoken register, the less divergence. The most difficult step was for them to realize that written formal is different from spoken formal register. Early in the course, our criticism of their writing was likely to be met with the complaint, "But that's the way people talk." Following the discussion of registers, they were able to accept the rejoinder, "But that's not the way people write in the formal register."

We feel these techniques worked very well in reaching objectives two and three.

Texts

Because of our assumption that a bidialectal approach involves a quasi-foreign language situation, we felt justified in choosing texts designed for foreign students learning English at a university in this country. The problem is similar for both groups of students, i.e., learning the standard structural patterns and logical rhetorical forms appropriate to academic usage. In order to reach objectives four and five, we adopted the texts below.

It is our conviction that an important aspect in learning to write well is frequent practice which is so structured that there is a minimum of possibility to make mistakes. The combination of Bander's American English Rhetoric (1971) and Spencer's Guided

Composition Exercises (1967) offers an extremely wide variety of writing experiences.

Guided Composition Exercises was used in order to provide an opportunity for the student to write many samples of structures which give them difficulty. In Part One, there are model sentences such as:

"He doesn't work in an office; he works in a department store."

The students are then given other pertinent information and write sentences using the same structure, such as:

"She doesn't work in a school; she works in a technical college."[11]

Christina Bratt Paulston (1971) has discussed the necessity of controlled writing practice which culminates in the student's using the pattern to create original material from his own experience. Although Guided Composition Exercises does not exemplify the decreasing control of the student's response discussed by Paulston, we were partially able to compensate for this by requiring one original sentence for each model practiced. This served to bring the patterns to the students' conscious awareness, to give them opportunities to practice and then to use the patterns creatively.

American English Rhetoric contains the core of the material for teaching the organizational techniques appropriate to writing at the academic level. There are 15 lessons consisting of model paragraphs which illustrate a particular type of organization (Spatial Development, Analytical Development, etc.) and discussion of the major points of each type, such as the placement of the topic sentence, inductive/deductive development, and the use and placement

of examples. There are also grammatical structure and vocabulary exercises in each lesson.

As frequently as possible, information from the classes in language and its history was incorporated into the writing assignments. For example, following the discussion of Chronological Development, the students were given seven statements, in random order, from the class on the Creolist view of Gullah and asked to rewrite them in a paragraph which would trace its development.

The students' papers were often used anonymously as examples. Once a student had turned in a grammatically perfect, but monotonously dull composition of ten or so Subject-Verb-Object sentences. It was a perfect example for a demonstration of the necessity to use a variety of sentence types. The student had no hesitation about letting the others know whose paper it was and led the rewriting.

We feel that a composition class should incorporate many activities, both to demonstrate in many ways the effective use of good writing and also to keep the class from becoming dull. An example of such an activity is the one which accompanied the discussion of Spatial Development. A defining characteristic of a composition with good Spatial Development is that one should be able to draw a picture from the description. Using directions from the models given by some of the students, others drew diagrams and pictures on the chalkboards.

Other activities included working in groups as often as possible. Sometimes the groups worked in competition, sometimes to pool

information, but the exercises done in groups always seemed to be completed faster and better than those done individually.

The cumulative exercise for each lesson is an original paragraph based on the model, requiring the use of certain of the grammatical points covered in the lesson. To assure ourselves that the students understood what was expected and thus avoid the frustrating experience of spending a great deal of time and yet doing an assignment incorrectly, the paragraphs were begun in class and finished as homework.

Although the students objected strenuously to writing outlines, ("Making an outline is putting yourself in a box.") we feel it an essential tool to organizing ideas logically and quickly, so we require an outline for each paragraph (and they continue to object.)

While the students were mastering the rhetorical forms, we did not wish to add the burden of research, so they were encouraged to use any information from their own experience which could be organized appropriately.

The ideal curriculum for our approach would be as follows: 1)investigation of dialects and registers; 2)historical development of Black dialect; 3)discussion of Black culture and the function of Black dialect; 4)intensive study of Bander and Spencer; 5)research paper project. When the students were assigned term papers in other classes during the first term, we were compelled to revise the curriculum because of our conviction that the English class should be an integral part of the total program and Standard

English a tool in University study. Thus, the techniques of research paper writing were introduced about mid-point in the first term.[12]

Students who were assigned projects in other classes were to submit them for the English class as well. These students seemed pleasantly surprised that their projects could serve as more than a fulfillment of the English class requirement. Those who were not assigned projects in other classes were encouraged to explore their current interests for a topic or to choose one which might prepare them for a course in the future.[13]

The completed term papers were not without flaw, but they were in academically acceptable form, and we feel that we were able to provide a successful initiation to a very complex process.

In an attempt to provide a positive model for the students of a Black author using standard rhetorical forms, we chose Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice (1968). We know that the students identify with Cleaver--the man, but such comments as "That's too heavy" have persuaded us that the students are not yet at ease enough with the formal written style to identify with Cleaver--the author. A better solution may possibly be the use of some of the newer poetry, music and short stories by Black authors with which the students can identify, and contrast these culturally and linguistically with examples in traditional form. This area needs further study.

Evaluation

It is extremely difficult to evaluate the success (or failure) of a particular approach to teaching composition by comparing writing

samples. Statistical measures are difficult if not impossible. Therefore, we did not attempt to gather statistical data. We do feel, however, capable of making certain assessments of the efficacy and motivation of our approach, at least from the students' view.

As an experimental project, we can say that this one was a success from the students' point of view. Two anonymously answered evaluation instruments, one developed by the Department of General Linguistics and the other by the College of Arts and Sciences, were administered to the whole group at the end of the fall term. The course received moderate to high "marks" in all areas, including "Improvement of Language Skills", "Amount of Work", and "General Evaluation."

Since we had been forced to compromise on the ideal instructor, i.e., team-teaching, we were interested to note that the students were satisfied in that area. When it came time to register for the second term, we lost few of the originals, and those because of scheduling problems. We consider this a plus on the evaluation, because students in the 1970's do not continue with something they find painful or "irrelevant".

From our point of view, the bidialectal approach was as highly successful in its motivational effect as we had anticipated. We can see a steady improvement in the quality of the students' compositions from the first ones in September, and we are now convinced

that a bidialectal approach can work for such students as ours. The remaining difficulties lie mainly in procedures and techniques.

FOOTNOTES

1. This position has been most vociferously espoused by James Sledd, 1969.

2. Also see Virginia F. Allen's discussion of teacher training in "Teaching English Across Dialects."

3. The evidence of the Creolists is far from conclusive, but as a hypothesis, it is quite useful. For a discussion, see Bailey, 1965; Decamp, 1971 Stewart, 1968, 1969.

4. Cf. Labov, 1970, and Haugen, 1964.

5. Cf.,for example, Sledd, 1969 and Rustin, 1971.

6. Cf. McDavid and McDavid, 1951. p. 2, and Herskovitz, 1941, pp. 261-91.

7. The best discussion of Register and dialect is to be found in Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1964, pp. 75-110.

8. The students' bemused reaction to the word "itimate" informed us that they were thinking of the popular, not the linguistic use, of the term. This register is characterized by a lack of redundancy and background information which is unnecessary among people who know each other very well.

9. From Bruder, 1972, pp. 245-6.

10. The term "Slang" here is used in no way pejoratively, but to give a tag to that feature of Black dialect characterized by rapidly changing lexical items. Perhaps the linguistic term cant or argot would be more appropriate to the actual situation, but since it was the students' own term, and since they understand both the nature and the function of "Slang" in Black dialect, we did not feel it necessary to introduce new terms.

11. (p. 2) Note that since this is a British publication, some of the specifically British patterns will have to be omitted.

12. While there are many fine examples of handbooks for research paper writers, they are usually intended for those who know the fundamentals of writing such a paper. In most cases this was a completely new experience for our students. Markman and Waddell's 10 Steps to Writing a Research Paper, with its progression from "Choosing a Topic" to "Putting the Paper in Final Form" seemed the clearest presentation for our students.

    10 Steps is an excellent guide, but lacks specific exercises and activities. To compensate, we first gave a True/False (open-

book) test to familiarize the students with the book and with the various citation forms. Then, for actual practice, we brought to class samples of the kinds of sources the students might be using, e.g., journals, magazines, texts, record jackets, etc. The students were given problems, such as: Prepare a bibliography card for each of these source items; Summarize the information on the back of these record jackets; Make footnotes for these items, including first and second entry forms. The students worked in groups using their texts while the instructors circulated to supervise and assist when needed.

13. One student chose to write on Gullah, a topic completely unknown to him before last term.

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